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ABSTRACT

This bulletin aims to identify good practice in the adoption of a strategic approach to developing short courses in work-related nonadvanced further education (WRNAFE) in Great Britain. The focus is on vocational updating and retraining aimed principally at those in employment, usually at full cost to employers/sponsors. The bulletin discusses information collected by a study of employers and colleges. Findings indicate that (1) employers identify short-course training needs in an ad hoc manner without reference to labor market information; (2) local education authority (LEA) and college program plans exhibit a lack of mission identification, objectives setting, and, in general, strategic planning; (3) a coherent and responsive service for employer retraining needs requires planned coordination on an intra- and inter-institutional basis; and (4) monitoring and evaluation procedures are essential in assessing performance. Issues raised by revenue and capital funding are discussed. The bulletin concludes with this suggestion: that planning for revenue-earning short-course activity should be embedded in future LEA and individual college corporate plans and programs. (YLB)

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FURTHER EDUCATION UNIT

DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN NAFE

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Planning of short courses in WRNAFE

In responding to calls for greater flexibility of provision in WRNAFE, it is generally accepted that FE has significantly increased its level of short-course activity in recent years. To the extent that such courses have been at 'full cost' and directed toward the retraining and updating of people at work, this increase must be due, at least in part, to the promotional and pump-priming efforts of the DES PICKUP programme. However, much of the progress to date appears to derive from initiatives taken by individuals rather than from a planned strategy at authority level.

This bulletin aims to identify good practice in the adoption of a strategic approach which develops short-course provision in a more deliberate and effective fashion and integrates it into the broader portfolio of FE college work.

Geoff Stanton
Chief Officer, FEU

WRNAFE planning

The WRNAFE planning process essentially concerns funding of the more traditional courses of initial training which are rate supported. However, many local education authorities (LEAs) have come to realise the desirability of planning NAFE provision as a whole. The Training Agency accepts development plans that have this wider horizon, although contracts are still based on the work-related non-advanced further education (WRNAFE) programme. Therefore LEA WRNAFE plans and programmes can include self-financing provision which, however, must be separately identified in annual programmes to prevent double funding.

If it is accepted that a sound base for WRNAFE planning is the identification of employers' updating needs, then it is likely that WRNAFE plans should include not only short courses but a wide variety of flexible learning modes, increasingly in combination.

Definition of short courses

The term 'short course' may be used to describe a wide variety of provision in terms of length, target audience and fee structure. This study considered and was influenced by a taxonomy developed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) which the Department of Education and Science (DES) is to use in a new and more comprehensive data-collection system for short courses based on the preceding academic year.

While all short courses exhibit some common characteristics such as disproportionate development costs and scheduling problems, variables such as the level of fees charged and the particular needs of the different markets served appear to preclude a generalised strategic approach. The focus of this study is on vocational updating and retraining provision aimed principally at those in employment. This focus has been chosen because of the growing importance of generating new client groups and associated revenue at a time of adverse demographic trends and tighter funding.

For these reasons, the term 'short courses' used in this bulletin should be interpreted as—**updating and retraining programmes, usually at full cost to employers/sponsors.**

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Identification of training needs

The need for Labour Market Information (LMI) is common to both the planning of initial training relevant to employment opportunity and the provision of updating and retraining for those at work. Previous bulletins in this series have indicated the range of sources consulted during the planning process. However, respondents in this study, while appreciating information on labour trends, doubt the utility of broad-brush surveys in terms of actual operational guidance for the essentially shorter-term nature of short-course demand. Computer Assisted Local Labour Market Information (CALLMI), in particular, was viewed with considerable reserve as being, at best, only a snapshot of demand obtained from employers whose own planning horizons are often very limited.

There is evidence to show that if collaboration and consultation with colleges is weak during industrial sector surveys conducted by Economic Development Units, the resulting research reports are often bereft of specific guidance useful to short-course planning. Many firms, particularly the smaller ones, operate without adequate resource plans aligned to their business forecasts and often require assistance in identifying their contingent training needs. This requires more in-depth study than is usual in relatively superficial market research and involves a specific form of consultancy—Training Needs Analysis.

ILLUSTRATION A

One college visited during the course of this study obtained PICKUP Education Support Grant (ESG) funding for a programme of Training Audits to be conducted among 100 small firms in industrial sectors relevant to college strengths. The audit team was led by an experienced practitioner. The specialised consultancy skills involved were to be cascaded down to other staff through the staff development programme.

This illustration tends to be exceptional. In general, short-course training needs have been identified in an *ad hoc* manner by individual members of staff with little training needs analysis experience or, in a slightly more systematic way, by PICKUP officers, short course units or consortia. It is significant that projects designed to assess training needs, such as those connected with Local Collaborative Projects (LCPs), have tended to limit scope and emphasise depth as experience was gained.

The realisation that special efforts are needed to help employers identify their training needs has prompted some authorities to develop much closer bonds with employers.

ILLUSTRATION B

A growing number of LEAs are pioneering a more structured approach to labour market intelligence. For example, one authority visited during this study had established education/employer 'compacts' on a sector-by-sector basis, whereby a continuous and dynamic partnership with collaborating firms identifies both initial education and retraining programmes relevant to the particular vocational area and the current state of the companies involved.

Planning of short courses

Central to this study is the concept that strategic planning of short courses in isolation from other NAFE provision is undesirable. Strategic planning should be directed toward satisfying the needs of chosen client groups rather than based on a particular type of provision or learning mode. This demands a market-orientated rather than production-orientated approach to NAFE planning.

Colleges of FE have multiple objectives, based upon their overall aims or 'missions'. The primary purpose of strategic planning is to put these aims in order of priority and set targets for achievement. However, to effect this planning process, the client market must be sub-divided into manageable groups or 'market segments'; this can be effected in a variety of ways.

For example, administratively:

Rate supported	*Enhanced* (partially rate supported) YTS, etc.	*Full cost* (PICKUP)

or, more desirably, in terms of client groups:

Initial education (mainly 16- to 19-year olds)	*Non-vocational and leisure* (mainly adult)	*Adult unemployed*	*Adults at work* Updating and retraining mainly at full cost

Several variations of the model based on client groups have been observed during this study. For example, in Illustration B, initial training for potential employees was linked to updating for the existing workforce on a sector-by-sector basis. This model is sometimes described as the 'companies' overall human resourcing needs' approach. A second variation is to co-ordinate all vocational provision for adults in an Adult Strategy Unit—this model will be described later (Illustration C).

Strategic planning at LEA level

Scanning a sample of LEA WRNAFE plans confirms

the earlier observation made in *Bulletin No. 5* of this series that short PICKUP-type courses receive mention in approximately half the plans. Clear statements of segmented missions, priorities and defined strategic objectives based on anticipated demographic, commercial and industrial change are rare. Other than generalised objectives designed to maintain student numbers, no quantified targets for full-cost revenue generation were observed. Although some authorities visited during the study claimed to have or intend to have such targets, these were not incorporated into WRNAFE plans. Only one authority visited disaggregated short-course details for management information purposes.

The general absence in WRNAFE plans of a strategic dimension to short-course planning is, perhaps, indicative of the dilemma felt by most authorities when they define their market priorities and state their 'missions'. For example, a number of authorities have referred to conflicting resource claims made by WRNAFE and non-WRNAFE (community) provision. Some LEA officers allude to the 'moral' implications of seeking the most profitable market segments, e.g. full-cost provision, rather than serving client segments in the greatest need.

However, it can be argued that additional revenue to the authority, from any source, can be used to benefit all clients. This case appears to be amply supported by evidence from authorities that have sought to maximise their full-cost provision and yet have been able to expand their community programmes.

Strategic planning at college level

Inspection of a number of college action programmes shows a similar lack of mission identification, goal objectives setting and targeting of PICKUP-type work. A high level of short-course activity strongly correlates with the establishment of an 'enterprise culture' set by the principal and the top management team. It is interesting, however, that even some successful PICKUP providers subscribe to the opinion that strategic planning of short courses is limited by unpredictability of demand—largely because of employers' ignorance of their own current and future human resourcing needs.

There are two possible explanations for this attitude on the part of college staff:

- a lack of confidence leading to a cautious attitude to risk—perhaps inculcated by their local authority and central directives;
- a common misconception of the nature and practice of corporate planning whereby it is thought that plans are determined by the sales forecast when, in fact, the reverse is true and sales targets are based on strategically planned inputs of staff, capital, product (course) development and level of marketing activity.

Delivery and co-ordination

A coherent and responsive service for employer retraining needs requires planned co-ordination both on an intra- and an inter-institutional basis. ESGs and LCPs have helped to pump-prime the establishment of college or LEA-based PICKUP units and consortia.

At the level of cross-authority co-ordination, PICKUP units fall into one of two basic types:

- those which offer essentially a 'brokerage service' on behalf of college departments which deliver the training, together with 'college image' enhancing, single-door access, training needs analysis, employer database and staff development functions (Illustration C);
- other units which, in addition to their brokerage function, also design programmes, negotiate contracts, handle funds and deliver training in their own right (Illustration D).

ILLUSTRATION C

A large shire county, regarding all vocational provision for adults as within one market segment, transformed an ESG pump-priming PICKUP unit into an Adult Strategy Unit with the role of co-ordinating provision for the adult unemployed, updating and retraining adults in employment and introducing open learning. A budget of £200,000 supports a Director, REPLAN Development Officer (part time), Adult Unemployed Co-ordinator, Open Learning Officers (1.5 FTE) and Administrative Assistants. Among the objectives are the setting of overall strategies, management of area-based provision, integration of new approaches with traditional FE, and liaison with funding bodies.

ILLUSTRATION D

A London borough has set up an Industrial Liaison Unit (ILU) consisting of two professional staff and an administrator. It is housed in a converted mansion together with a Training Access Point (TAP) and the authority's successful open learning unit whose marketing staff also provide market information likely to lead to short-course work. The ILU takes a more proactive role in the search for work than individual colleges, and liaises with short-course managers designated by departments. Contracts with clients are negotiated through the unit which then buys in college expertise, where appropriate and available, or uses outside specialists. Prices charged to clients include a percentage mark-up on the 'full cost' to cover ILU expenses.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation procedures are essential in assessing performance to declared objectives. However, the absence of quantified targets for short-course work clearly makes this impossible for the short-course programme as a whole. From the point of view of quality, many college staff believe this is indicated by the level of continued client patronage and do not apply any intermediate monitoring procedures. Most providers claim to conduct unstructured end-of-course evaluation sessions with participants and some issue questionnaires. The latter are usually less comprehensive than those devised for traditional courses. In summary, very little monitoring of short courses is carried out.

A number of respondents emphasised the need to 'get it right from the start' through careful diagnosis of clients' needs established by effective training officers. One authority has piloted a job/course profile matching procedure which may be applicable to short-course work, while another has funded a number of special appointments at LEA and college level to ensure that quality assurance procedures become embedded in all types of provision, including externally funded programmes, so that quality becomes part of, and does not merely inform, development.

Support and resourcing

The planned resourcing of short-course provision embraces both revenue and capital funding. As these raise different issues, they are considered separately.

Revenue funding

One WRNAFE plan notes that LEA budgeting conventions can inhibit entrepreneurial college activities. This authority has now adopted the phased introduction of new procedures that move progressively from historical resource allocation through cash-limited budgets, unit-cost-based budgets and, finally, management budgeting. Although recognised as being in the van of devolving budgets, the authority has still not fully resolved the problem of accounting for full-cost courses and there is still general uncertainty as to how the 'small numbers, high income' syndrome can be reconciled with performance indicators derived from staff: student ratios (SSRs).

Nevertheless, it does appear that, if they are to be successful, incentives to engage in full-cost short-course work require positive and supportive LEA policies governing the treatment of additional revenues, fair retention of surplus, permission to vire between budget heads, and ability to carry over from one financial year to another. Such freedoms were deemed to be already available when the publication *Implementing PICKUP in Local Authority Institutions* (FEU, 1987) was researched. Current legislation (Education Reform Act, 1988) gives enhanced freedom, for colleges in particular, to engage in entrepreneurial activity.

LEA action to support short-course activity encountered in this study includes:

- building up a strategic reserve to fund development;
- greater time allowance (abatement/remission) for departmental short-course co-ordinators;
- permission for additional posts to be funded out of income;
- incorporation into baseline budgets of pump-primed co-ordinator posts.

Apart from LEA revenue funding, support for PICKUP development and marketing has come from ESGs, LCPs, the European Social Fund (ESF), Mutual Development Fund and, indirectly, through clients' fees subsidised by training grants.

Capital resourcing

The development of short-course provision for industry is particularly important in the field of new technology; this generates investment demands for appropriate hardware and software. The purchase of 'modest items' such as micros may be incorporated into the cost structure of course budgets or funded by viring surpluses within LEA-imposed limits. However, significant conversion of revenue into capital is still subject to governmental control.

ILLUSTRATION E

A large college equipped a new CAD/CAM centre with 'state of the art' hardware and software on the basis of a contract to train customers of a local software house. A loan from the local authority, based on anticipated revenue flows, permitted the lease/purchase of the necessary equipment. A nationwide open learning programme for FE staff helped the unit build up income to some £0.5 million per annum. The unit now trains design staff and offers a bureau service. The suite of rooms and reception area have been revamped to commercial standards and the facility is also used for internal staff development and mainstream provision.

Other approaches include the hiving-off of revenue-generating activities such as a CAD consortium into a company limited by guarantee, or the adoption of a 'Resource Centre' model on an inter-institutional basis. In both cases, facilities are conceived primarily for retraining and updating work, but with access granted for mainstream use; a reversal of the conventional priority.

It is clear that capital funding from external agencies is freer from restraints than funds locked up in local authority budgets but, because of the multiplicity of external sources and the variety of new initiatives, a strategic plan is vital if authorities are to fund programmes effectively rather than programme funds.

Towards good practice

In the process of WRNAFE planning for short courses, it appears from this study to be good practice for LEAs and colleges *inter alia* to:

- identify clearly the updating and retraining market segment within colleges' overall missions, with an indication of the degree of priority considered appropriate and with quantified targets attached;
- adopt procedures which identify short-course activity and revenue for management purposes;
- take a positive role in creating an enterprise culture which encourages and rewards entrepreneurial activity;
- develop appropriate staff skills, particularly in strategic planning, consultancy and training needs analysis;
- co-ordinate the harnessing of external funds to strategically determined programmes.

Benefits

The positive benefits of enhancing short-course activity that have been identified in this study include:

- new client groups brought into college;
- greater insight into employer needs;
- additional revenue to:
  - support jobs,
  - upgrade facilities,
  - develop new mainstream provision,
  - subsidise existing underfunded provision;
- development of new skills through staff training and increased variety of work for teaching staff.

Way ahead

This study strongly suggests that planning for revenue-earning short-course activity should be embedded in future LEA and individual college corporate plans and programmes. The WRNAFE planning process has established an effective framework for this to take place.

Requests for additional copies of this bulletin should be addressed to the FEU Information Centre, telephone: 01-321 0433 ext. 256.

Information for this bulletin has been provided by Ron Arnfield, FEU consultant on short courses/ PICKUP. Enquiries relating to this bulletin or requests for further information regarding FEU project RP311 (WRNAFE) should be addressed to:

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